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***THE BARNABITES***



**Manual of history and spirituality  
of the Order of Clerics Regular  
of St. Paul Beheaded**

# Chapter 7

## PALEO-BARNABITE LIFE

The old Barnabite life is like the life-giving marrow which gives origin and vitality to the branches of the grown up tree.

Relying on the first documents of our history we will try to reconstruct this life, taking notice especially of the hierarchical structure of our first communities, then, of their coenobitic life centered on the “Chapters,” and finally we will touch on their asceticism and penitential practices. These practices provoked a general revolt against Barnabites and Angelics, but they came out of it strengthened in their resolve, and... tempered in an ardor, which could have become indiscreet, if it could have been kept at such a high intensity.

### **The Superior**

The Superior was elected every year, according to the Bull of Pope Paul III, in three successive Chapters, “by all vocales of the place at that time,” upon proposal by the Discreets.

About the system of election, the first rules say: “will be elected Superior the one to receive the majority of votes above the half.” He should have been a zealous and balanced person; and, once elected, he could not decline the position.

Once the Superior was elected, first the Vicar on behalf of the whole Community, then all the individuals “would pledge obedience begging to be accepted as a son. And, embracing and kissing all, he accepted them.”

At the end of this characteristic ceremony, he would confirm the other officers: the Discreet, the Vicar, the Master of novices, and the Mayor.

If the Community was the body, the Superior was the head, the father of all: he presided over the Chapters, accepted new postulants, and, finally, he had “the faculties to absolve from some cases, and others.”

### **The Discreets**

The Discreets were elected following the above procedure, “two or four, according to the small or large number of members,” men with experience, and rich with integrity, prudence, and mortification.

They would take turn “to watch over the House for its interior and exterior life,” all confreres would open their heart to them in a form of spiritual direction called then “dialogue” (in the Acts of 1544 we read: “every one of the Discreet had to ‘dialogue’ with” some of the confreres); together with the Superior, they were checking over discipline. It was also the competence of the Discreet to dismiss anyone who, after three admonitions, had been found negligent in spiritual life. But they should proceed with caution and charity, as the first Acts of the house show: “in the decision making may they be guided by the Crucified Lord, through motivation and union with him, rather than by their own wisdom; in examining the

situations of people, they should be prudent; now reprimanding with amiability, now flattering and with careful solicitude, providing whatever is needed. They should remember that they are the columns of the house, and they should be like four lamps constantly burning in front of Christ. They should teach with deeds rather than words.”

The Holy Founder’s Constitutions were very severe prescribing grave punishments for a negligent Discreet, due to their delicate function: “those things (expulsion after three admonitions) you have to submit... to the judgment of the Discreets; but if... they should make mistakes in the above things, under the cover of piety, then you should punish them in this way: from then on they could never again be admitted to this office; and if in any way they should complain, then expel them from the Society.”

### **The Vicar**

The Vicar was substituting the Superior when absent, and he was his “body, hands, and feet.” Another function was the one which today belongs to the Procurator. To this purpose the Acts offer us a very original and inspiring page: “(The Father Vicar) in his doing should not look for a caress, nor should he hope for smiling faces, instead, bound to the Cross and keeping that in mind, he should act looking only at the Crucified Christ, and trusting only Christ; if sometime he should be short of money, with faith he should go to the Crucified Lord to pray that, having nothing else, he would supply with a piece of his own torn flesh; aware that if the confreres would complain or would not be satisfied, he would be the cause, because it is a sign that he does not operate for the sake of Christ. If he would act for the sake of Christ and with faith in him, they would be satisfied, even if he should put in front of them a roasted slipper (to eat).”

During these times characterized by great love for poverty, the Constitutions are very severe with the Procurator who is too... providing! Here is what they say: “Only one person should handle the money. If, after a month, he has not disposed of them for the needs of the house, or in alms, for the first time he should fast on bread and water for three days; the second time he should be deprived of Holy Communion for the whole year, except on Easter: and not only should he be separated from all the confreres in all activities of the Community, but he should also be deprived of the conversation with the confreres, and of their prayers, and, besides, once a week for a whole year he should fast on bread and water. But if he should fall in the same mistake a third time, consider him as an owner, and throw him out of the Congregation.”

### **The Mayor**

In modern terminology the Mayor could be called the “moderator” of all activities.

Elected as usual among the confreres left without any office, the moderator, according to the 1552 Constitutions, had to be a lover of “strict observance of holy religion” and his task was to supervise the observance of the Constitutions and Ordinances, and the conduct of the officials, and to examine if “the strict observance and holy institutes were in want.”

To this effect, he could, according to his judgment, “get together all the Professed members: to see if one of the Discreets, or the Superior, had been negligent or malicious about those who should had been expelled, or warned about!”

In the 1579 Constitutions this office was abolished, and the task was entrusted to the senior Discreet.

### Life in common and the Chapters

What is meant to reach out for perfection as a community, and, therefore, how important were the Chapters, is well illustrated in a speech given by Father Morigia upon admitting the nobleman Joseph Contarini: “Remember, brothers, what you have done today together with me. We have accepted this our brother... therefore, try to be useful to him, both with your prayer in front of God, and with exhortations and holy deeds, as needed, and, at the same time, with your example, as you do first what you wish to say, or what you desire he would do.” What means could be more effective than the Chapters, that is, Community meetings for spiritual purpose? Their existence was so essential that from the Acts we know that “they were held three times a week... since they were so useful and fruitful, that, if possible, they should took place every day,” as it was done during Lent.

No religious could be absent from certain Chapters, like the *collatio*. They were guided by great charity, serious intention, but, most of all, Christ was in their midst.

The Holy Founder’s Constitutions prescribed that: “Whatever will be concluded or defined by the elder, not by age, but by a life worthy of praise,” should be written in a book.

Another wise norm followed this: “after a certain span of time (as you see fit), then you could read over what has been written, and, according to the opportunity, make additions.”

### Chapter of Faults

The professed, one by one, would go in the middle of the Chapter room, or in the choir of the church, and they would manifest their “greatest impediment to progress, and their resolution to embrace the opposite virtue.”

Any of the confreres, then, could stand and present his opinion, in total freedom and charity, about the conduct and defects of the accused; at the end all were suggesting remedies. At the end of the session, the Superior would make some recommendations, exhorting all to “grow day by day toward higher virtues... more than what had been done in the past.”

### Chapter of Censures

The Chapter of Censures could be general or particular. During the ‘general’ Chapter of Censures everyone would report “whatever he had noticed as reprehensible in others.” The confreres called in question, “right away humbly kneeling, accepted with gratitude the healthful advises, given with love, and were promising, as inflamed by the holy zeal of Divine honor, to faithfully amend themselves.”

The ‘particular’ Chapter of Censures, instead, would take place for a specific religious who clearly was not making progress in holiness, with the intention of freeing him from the impediments keeping him away from Christian virtues, “so that he would not be ungrateful for so many gifts received from God, and could be legitimately enumerated and acknowledged as a son of Paul the Saint.”

The Chapter had the merit not only to pin point the most outstanding imperfections, but offered precious and practical advises, dictated by disinterested charity. For sure great faith was needed, because in the midst of the Chapter there was “the blessed Jesus, and Christ’s help could not lack there where there was obedience; therefore, in so far as we are well disposed, we will always receive help...”

To advance in virtue, to overcome defects, it was everybody’s joy and worry; we even find in the Acts that “the Father established for some who were asking Hieronimo Maria help for the correction of some defects, not to receive Holy Communion until Hieronimo Maria would leave what they desired.”

### **The Collatio**

The *Collatio*, following the style of the old monastic gatherings described by Cassian, author in grand esteem by our ancestors, was, we could say, a meditation in common. No one could miss it; besides, sometimes friends were invited to participate.

The Holy Founder’s Constitutions established to be held “daily for at least one hour;” to take place especially before great solemnities, “to obtain the benefit searched by those who want to advance in spiritual life.”

Therefore, every religious, on his own or invited by the Superior, would stand and share his thoughts, without any oratory, but always aiming at “uprooting the roots of vices, and how to gain true and real, not imaginary, virtues.”

Our ancestors believed this practice to be of such importance to affirm peremptorily that: “everything will go to ruin every time they would miss this holy conference; but if you, with love and avidity, and not by habit, will persist in it, you will prosper in everything.”

### **Sacred Worship**

Although the Chapters constituted the most salient expression of the Community life of the first Barnabites, they were not the only one. For a full picture we have to take a look at their liturgical and prayer life.

The Mass was celebrated everyday but not by all the priests, although the practice was becoming more frequent. Both Clerics and Brothers on Sundays and Feast-days, previous blessing from the Superior, would receive Holy Communion.

The Divine Office was recited daily throughout the day according to the monastic tradition. The official habit during the recitation of the Divine Office was the rochet over the cassock.

During the meal the Reading was the rule, as already prescribed in the Holy Founder’s Constitutions.



Great value was attached to silence and a recollected life. Father Soresina attests that our ancestors “would mortify themselves with continuous silence; at the point that once the Divine Office was finished, in the morning they would ask permission to say only the necessary things.” After dinner “they would have a little conversation, and then not a word could be heard.”

A special value was attached to the “Great Silence,” at night, after evening prayers. We know that it was Father Bartolomeo Ferrari, while Superior General, to introduce the practice of evening prayers.

One of these prayers, for sure, was the “*De Profundis*” (Ps. 53), a practice introduced by the Theatines, accompanied by the ringing of the bell to indicate the end of the day. On Wednesdays and Saturdays they would also recite the litanies of the Blessed Mother, followed by the Superior’s blessing.

Life in common was at its peak with the celebration of the Investiture with the religious habit, and the Profession of vows. It is enough to read the pages in “Barnabite Beginnings.” At the moment we mention just the constant growth of fraternal feeling among the confreres expressed in the Barnabite embrace exchanged with the new members and the newly professed.

A very meaningful gesture was the embrace reserved for new comers as well as for those who were dismissed from the Congregation, like in the case of Davidico who “in the midst of recollections and embraces, as done by the children of Paul, was dismissed.”

### **The penances of our first Fathers**

The “domestic” penances practiced by our first Fathers, deserve a special treatise of its own, but for now we will limit ourselves to a general view.

The food was modest; the Constitutions prescribed: “Meat is never allowed for those in good health, except on the following solemnities: Christmas day and the following two days; the one and the other Easter with the following two days; the Assumption and the Birthday of the Blessed Mother; the birthday of Saint John the Baptist; the conversion and the death of St. Paul; and the feast of All Saints.” The Wednesdays and Fridays from the feast of All Saints to Easter, were days of fast. There were two modest meals; no food was allowed in private rooms.

The house should have been “humble... with no sculptures or colors, except white;” rather, “it is a shame,” we read in the Constitutions, “for us to have Homes, and much more palaces.”

The money was entrusted to one person, who had to be careful not to overstock the house with food or for too many days; anyway by the end of the month he had to liquidate all the funds, under penalty, often, of expulsion.

The furniture had to be “little and humble;” clothing of little value and “such that one could wear another’s cassock;” the beds, “simple and without decorations;” the sheets of rough wool.

Obedience had to be “free not forced;” and the religious should have acted “according to the intentions of the Superior,” more than wait for commands. Disobedience was punished

severely, as we read in *Barnabite Beginnings*. External manifestations of obedience and dependence was the frequent use of “Your Blessing, Father,” in the morning and in the evening, and before the major events of the day. This use impressed one of the very first guests, who has left us a very suggestive description of it.

Naturally such interior enthusiasm was going to explode in public manifestations of penance, which, for those times, were not at all strange or rare. Before analyzing them, let us look at the spiritual situation in Milan during the 1500’s. Father Gabuzio has left us a very pitiful picture. He writes: “The Christian and ecclesial discipline was very lapsed, and the morals very deteriorated; and the harvest was large, but the workers few.” Few were the priests with an irreprehensible conduct, to the point that the people had coined the saying, “Do you want to go to Hell? Become a priest!”

What were the causes? For many years Milan had lacked shepherds, the bishops. Besides, we cannot forget the negative influence by the Spanish domination, beginning with the victory of Charles V over Francis I, at Pavia, in 1525.

This the background of the reform brought about by Anthony M. Zaccaria and his children. What better tools than public penances to reawaken the consciences, victims of sluggishness? And so one of our first writers affirms: “How we started it was to make public penances through the city of Milan.” In 1534 the reporter Gian Marco Burigozzo writes in his “Cronaca,” “Have appeared in Milan some priests wearing a despicable habit, with a kind of round biretta on, without hat, all dressed the same, with bowed heads, and living together close by Saint Ambrose, where, they say, they do their offices, and live together: and they are all young.”

Our historians provide us with more information about these penances. “As a sign of penance they wear a dark brown habit, rather small without gathers, with round birettas, and in the house black cassocks. When they walked through Milan, the crowds would yell after them as mad men, making noise over their tables, while children and others would scream: look at the bigots, and similar other things. Hypocrites!”

Although many Fathers were from noble families, they did not avoid these public penances. For example, we read: “Mister Baldassare dei Medici, on a feast-day, painted his face like a monstrosity; then standing at the door of the house of the Fathers, as people were going in and out, looking in a mirror he would say: look how beautiful you are! This gentleman was a very vain and honored man, having served as *caudatorio* (tail-bearer) to the bishop of Trent.”

Classic is the mortification imposed to Besozzi, future Father General, who had left wife, children, and the law-practice to enter the Congregation. While still a secular, he was sent to Saint Ambrose, wearing sackcloth, to beg alms together with other poor people.

But, although the conversions were many, there was a lot of derision, as we have seen above, insinuations about the relationship between Barnabites and Angelics, and many of the nobles resented to see members of their families, who had joined the Congregation, to practice those debasing penances, and so to have such a disgrace upon their honor. Plus, this new flourishing of holiness was exposing the serious deficiencies among ecclesial people, some of whom did not hesitate to incite the people against our Fathers.

G. M. Burigozzo, in 1532, wrote that a Carmelite from Saint John the Baptist, “was telling of synagogues taking place close by Saint Ambrose by men and women.” Our historians speak instead of a “certain Fra Cornelio, who, giving lectures at La Rosa, would spend most of his time to speak ill of the Fathers, condemning them as hypocrites, with all kind of slanders against their Orders. He was trying to discredit them in front of the people. At one time, more enthused than ever to speak ill of the Fathers, after pouring out his heart, he tried to convince the people that if they would do violence to the Fathers, burning them in their house, they would offer a sacrifice to God.”

The present situation, already mentioned by Burigozzo in 1532, became acute in 1533, and reached its peak in October, 1534 with a formal accusation against Anthony M. Zaccaria, to the Senate of Milan, to the Archbishop’s Curia, to the Tribunal of the Inquisition, both in Milan and in Rome.

The accusations were:

- 1) The novelties introduced by those religious were disturbing public peace;
- 2) due to the same, the dignity of many nobles was humiliated, as they were exposed to the mockery of the populace, with humiliations and show of penances never seen before;
- 3) there was a serious danger that what seemed to be forms of piety, might damage the integrity of faith: all the more so as theses religious had introduced in public various religious practices which instead of promoting sound and authentic piety, were fomenting superstition.

It seemed like the one to press charges was a priest.

For the Fathers, who “although in the midst of confusion and shame, remained steadfast in the peace of their hearts... glad to suffer for love of Christ,” this trial must have been terrible. Meantime they were all in prayer, trusting in God’s help.

Anthony Mary, as he saw “his little boat in danger in the midst of these persecutions, “called his followers together (October 4, 1534).

With a fiery speech he made them face the alternative of leaving the Congregation or of persevering in the love of Christ Crucified, imitating the Apostles and Saint Paul, their guide and father, aware that the Order was found for mortification, to despise the world, and for them to overcome oneself and the passions.

“And,” some eyewitnesses testified, “the fiery words coming out of that mouth, were such that they were all caught on fire: so much that all of them prostrated themselves in the midst of tears, promising to persevere.”

The trial in front of the three authorities, civil, religious, and extraordinary, started the next day, October 5. The representatives were: for the Senate, Francis Casati; for the Diocese Giovanni M. Tosi, as a substitute for Ippolito II d’Este; for the Inquisition, Melchiorre Crivelli. Men of utmost integrity, they started “with great diligence to examine their (the Barnabites) actions.” As they faced “their great simplicity and deep love for God and of spiritual things,” they realized that the accusations had all been made up.

The crisis and the victorious outcome caused a turning point in the life of the Order, a period of reflection and of formulation, which will give its own physiognomy to the Barnabite family. For this process to fully take place we will have to witness the second and not less dramatic crisis, the one of 1551-52.



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Meantime the Holy Founder had the opportunity to express his feelings and to outline for his sons an audacious program capable of challenging any kind of persecution. We find it in the famous speech given by Anthony Mary to his disciples (the MAGNA CHARTA), and which Father Gabuzio received from one of the eyewitnesses, Fr. Soresina, and then transmitted to us in one of the most suggestive and memorable pages of his “Historia.”